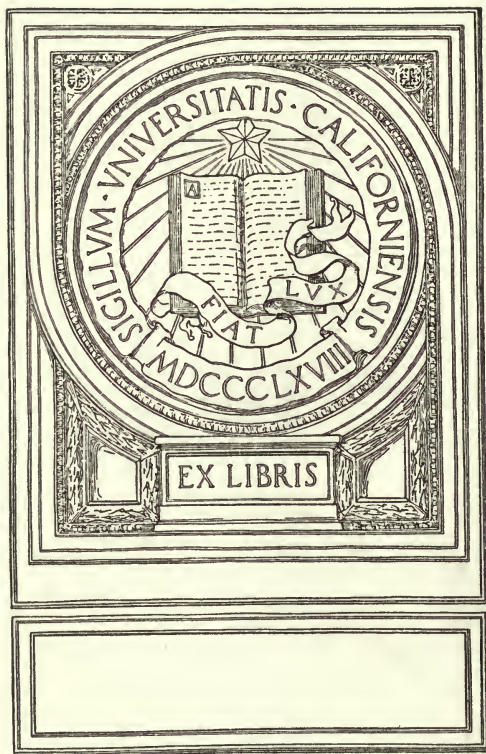


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# PUNCH: THE IMMORTAL LIAR

*BOOKS BY CONRAD AIKEN*

EARTH TRIUMPHANT

TURNS AND MOVIES

THE JIG OF FORSLIN

NOCTURNE OF REMEMBERED SPRING

THE CHARNEL ROSE

THE HOUSE OF DUST

SCEPTICISMS

PUNCH: THE IMMORTAL LIAR



# PUNCH: THE IMMORTAL LIAR

DOCUMENTS IN HIS HISTORY

By CONRAD AIKEN



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PART I

PUNCH: THE IMMORTAL LIAR





## TWO OLD MEN WHO REMEMBERED PUNCH

### I

Do I remember Punch? — Listen — I'll tell you.  
I am an old man now, but I remember,  
I saw him in the flesh. My, my, what flesh! . . .  
I can still see him shut his eyes to sing,—  
As he did always when he'd drunk too much! . . .  
He was the splendidest fool I ever knew.

His great red nose was bent down like an ogre's,  
His mouth was wide, he was half-bald, half-grey,  
His legs were bandy. . . . Every woman in town  
Had slapped his face,— although, to hear him talk,  
You'd think he'd kissed them all! He was a coward,  
We kicked him, spat upon him, whipped him, cursed him,  
And threw him out of doors. . . . And yet, we liked him.

What lies he told! He had a genius for it.  
He killed his wife, hopped upon Sheba's knee,  
Walked and talked with devils, raped and murdered . . .  
Why did we listen to him! . . . Why did we like him! . . .  
Well, I don't know. Say rather that we loved him —  
There was a something noble about the man.  
Somehow, though small, he cast an enormous shadow.

The night before he died, we carried him home.  
He stopped to lean on the churchyard wall a moment,  
And stared at the tower clock. "Listen!" he said.

"This heart that beats here,— underneath my hand,—  
All of the clocks in the world keep time with it!  
Even the stars in the sky, the sun and planets,  
Measure their time by me! — I am the centre!"  
We thrust him into his house. . . . He fell down laughing . . .

Yes, there was something noble about the man.  
He was half mad, no doubt, a sneak, a villain:  
And yet, somehow, the world seemed greater for him;  
Seemed smaller when he died.

2

So that's your story, is it? — Well, here's mine!  
Draw close your coats about you, cross yourselves —  
And shut the door! There's a queer wind tonight  
Howling as if some ghost were riding on it —  
Whose ghost, God knows! And what I've got to tell you  
Might crack the earth, and set the devil talking.  
See the blue lightning twinkle on that window!  
Look at the ashes dancing on that hearth!  
Old Nick is riding trees, and at this instant —  
Don't look! — may have his red eye at the keyhole.  
You say: this Punch had something noble in him.  
Noble! Good God! Are words to have no meanings?  
Christ was a scoundrel then, and thieves are angels!  
Noble! There's rain on the window for your answer,  
Old Nick's tattoo of talons. Look outside,  
You'll see him spurt off like a ball of fire,  
You'll hear a peal of laughter, a clap of thunder,  
And smoke will sting your eyes. If there was ever  
A viler villain walked this fatal earth

Tell me his name! Mischief he was in flesh,  
Mischief he left behind him in his seed,  
And ruins rotting where he found his pleasure.  
You say he lied. You say his crimes were fables.  
But were they? Where is Judy? Dead and festering,  
With a gravestone fallen down above her carrion.  
Tell me,— what woman was there in this village  
He didn't try to kiss? Not one, you know it;  
And if he failed that wasn't his fault, surely.  
Who'll put his beer down, now, and swear on the Bible  
He ever knew a good deed done by Punch? . . .  
Ah! there's rain on the window for your answer.

Now, then,— you'll say, perhaps, I'm superstitious.  
But am I? . . . Have I ever looked for signs? . . .  
You know me; and you know I'm no old woman  
Who squints in a cup of tea-leaves for a portent.  
But this I swear, and this I'll swear till doomsday,—  
More things go on about us on this earth  
Than flesh can know of. Trees have devils in them,  
Ghosts go walking out on the waves of the air  
And sing in the belfry when the bells are tolling.  
What else are owls and bats but evil spirits—  
Why do they haunt the churchyard if they're not?  
No, I'm not superstitious, more than any  
Who use their senses; but I'll tell you this;  
The man we knew as Punch was no mere mortal.

Who was he? . . . Wait. I'll tell you. But before,  
I've got three questions for you you can't answer!  
Who saw Punch come to town? Who was his father?  
Where did he come from? . . . Ah! You see; he's human,  
(Or so you'd say,) yet no one ever knew

Just who he was, or what his business was!  
Presto! and here he stood with a purse of money,  
Out of a cloud, you might say,—dropped from heaven.  
Again I say,—who saw Punch come to town? . . .  
One man! One man alone of all this village  
Saw how he came. Or did he? That's the question!  
Old Crabbe it was — dead now these fifteen years —  
And he it was who told me. . . . It was spring,  
And Crabbe, who was still a boy, was in the orchard  
Beyond the churchyard — Gardy Gleason's orchard.  
He climbed the wall that joins the churchyard wall  
And skirts the road, and sat there, legs a-dangling,  
To peel a stick. Now then, you know that wall —  
You've climbed it after Gardy Gleason's apples;  
And you, as well as I, know how the road  
Dips down without a curve along the valley  
A mile and more. . . . Well, Crabbe was whittling there,  
And looking down the road. And not a soul  
Was in it: he was sure, for he was watching  
To see his father's horse come round the turn.  
Bare as your hand! A warm spring day, no clouds,  
Bees in the apple-blossoms over his head,  
And the sun behind his back. He saw his shadow  
Slanting across the road, and almost reaching  
The other wall; a thin high-shouldered shadow —  
And started, as boys will, to fling his arms,  
To see the shadow wave. . . . And then, of a sudden,  
Without a squeak or sound, another shadow  
Slanted across the road and fell on the wall  
Beyond his own,—and staid there. . . . Arms in the air,  
Young Crabbe went stiff with fright; he turned his head  
And saw in the road, alone before him,—Punch!  
Punch, with a bag and stick across one shoulder —

And a red grin on his face! . . .

Well — that was queer:

And young Crabbe felt his entrails coiling coldly.  
Where had he come from — slid down out of the air? . . .  
Popped from the ground? . . . But just as he was thinking  
That after all the fellow might have found  
The time to steal upon him,— while he waved  
His arms and shadows there,— just then he noticed  
A thing that made his hair stand up and creep:  
The road, of course, was dusty at that season,—  
And Punch's boots showed not a speck of dust . . .  
This was enough! He slid back over the wall  
And took the short-cut home.

So that's the first count.

The fellow suddenly comes to us from nowhere:  
Breaks from the air as a fish might breach the sea.  
Does flesh do things like that? Not human flesh!  
Only the flesh of angels or of devils,  
Which, having a look of flesh, yet, lighter than air,  
Burns at the touch and blows in a wind like fire;  
Or, seen at dusk, takes on a glow like phosphor . . .  
He comes to us from nowhere; and he tells us  
Of inquisitions, demons, saints, and hangmen.  
Who ever heard — in our time — of such things?  
Where was this village that he boasted of —  
Who ever heard him name it? — And these people;  
These constables and Ketches that he murdered  
So humorously, to make so sweet a story; —  
Where are they buried? . . . Ah,— you say,— he lied.  
And so he did. He lied,— when he was drunk,—  
Even of Polly Prim, whom we all knew . . .  
But what does that prove? Nothing — no, sir, nothing!



For was he always lying? — That's the question! . . .  
Consider, then. . . . A mystery comes among us,  
Ugly and vile beyond all human knowledge,  
A walking vice; he lies, seduces, steals,  
Gets roaring drunk, and leads our youth to mischief.  
The village reeks with him. Corruption rules us.  
Lechery shakes our walls, the women snicker,  
The young men brawl. . . . What's this — a sort of  
angel? . . .

And here are portents, too! . . . A rain like blood,—  
And the laundry reddens where it dries on the walls;  
Voices are heard; a curious sound of singing  
Thrills from the church at night; and in the morning  
A pig is dead on the altar with its throat cut.  
The same night Janet Crowe has had a vision:  
The door breaks in, the Devil comes in roaring  
With a huge knife in his hands, seizes her hair,  
And drags her screaming. . . . When she wakes she's lying  
Naked upon the floor; the door's wide open;  
Her right hand's paralysed for three days after . . .  
Next Judy's dead, and no one knows just how.  
Punch finds her on the kitchen floor, he says,—  
Her hair spread out, and poison on her lips.  
Well, did she kill herself,— or was she murdered?  
Polly, we know, maintains she killed herself —  
And Punch says she was murdered. Who was right?  
This much we know: we couldn't prove him guilty,  
Nor, for that matter, find a trace of poison;  
A darkness fell about her; and a silence  
Which only owl's or devil's eyes could see through . . .  
“Devils!” — Think hard about that word a minute;  
Conjure these mysteries and freaks before you,  
And then recall how strangely and how often

It sounded from a drunken tongue we knew.  
Who was it, in the grass on Mory's hill,  
Saw Satan walking there with his tail about him  
And Faustus at his side? . . . Who was it told us  
How he had stoned this devil and his clerk  
And sent them capering mistily in the sunlight  
Through buttercup and dogrose? . . . Last,— who was it  
Mounted the wind and stepped through time and space  
To talk with Sheba, Solomon, even Judas,  
And all in fact — remark this well — save Christ?  
Ah! Now we're coming to it. You begin  
To see the dark conclusion I've been hinting!  
And now I'll tell you what at last convinced me.  
Draw close your coats about you! Cross yourselves!  
Outside the window, there, in the rain and lightning,  
Hangs some one else who listens to this story.

I had a dream: I dreamed it three times over.  
The first time was the night that Punch lay dying;  
The second time, the day we found him dead  
With his feet against his door, and buried him;  
The third time when a year had passed. I dreamed  
A devil stood in the pulpit of our church  
With a bible in his hands; his face was red,  
His horns were glittering gold, his tail, like a serpent,  
Was mooned and striped with colours that waned and waxed,  
His teeth were sharp as jewels. There he laughed,  
As the bible, fluttering open in his hands,  
Turned to an infant's head, which down he dashed . . .  
Or was it a rose, which turned on the floor to blood? . . .  
We leapt in horror, and ran towards him shouting,  
We chased him over the pews and down the stairs,  
And into the vault; and there, in the darkest corner

We beat him down with sticks, we stoned and kicked him  
And trampled on him, until at last, as snakes do,  
He quivered,— only a little,— in seeming death.  
We thrust his body, then, with the plashy tail  
Wound twice about his belly, into a coffin,  
And carried it to the graveyard; it was raining;  
And some one cried aloud to us in the darkness  
“Bury him now in holy ground; for then  
His soul will wither and have no power to harm!”  
And this we did. We dug a grave in haste  
And tumbled the coffin in, and heaped it over  
With mud and stones. The rain lashed down upon us;  
And some one cried aloud to us in the darkness  
“Drive now a cross of wood in the earth above him  
And blast his soul.” And so we made a cross  
And hammered it into the loosened earth with shovels.  
But at the third stroke suddenly came a cry,  
The wet earth flashed and opened, the coffin burst,  
The devil leapt before us, thumbed his nose,  
And laughing, with a low sound like boulders falling  
Or far-off thunder, vanished into the rain.  
We looked at the grave, and saw the earth heal over  
Before our very eyes . . . roots, grass, and all. . . .

Three times I dreamed this dream; — and from the third,  
Waking in time, on such a night as this  
With large rain plashing on the walls and windows  
And the chimney gulping wind, I suddenly saw  
The meaning of my dream; I pulled my clothes on  
And took my spade and lantern and went out  
Into the darkness. Rain and clouds like smoke  
Flew past the lantern; dark were all the houses;  
The broken weather-vane on the church was clinking,



The churchyard gate groaned loudly as it opened,  
And the oak-tree buzzed in the wind. I raised the lantern,  
And saw the tall white pyramid of marble  
That's next to Punch's grave. By this I set  
The lantern down on the grass; and took my spade  
And dug. The wet earth cut like cheese. In no time  
I'd gone six feet. I held the lantern up  
And looked down into the hole — and there was nothing.  
Well, then — I thought perhaps I'd been mistaken —:  
Dug to one side. I took the spade again  
And dug two feet to the right, two feet to the left,—  
Then lengthened it. And what I found was — nothing!  
No trace! — no trace of coffin or of bones!  
Only the rainy roots . . . I filled the grave  
And went back home: and lay awake all night  
Thinking about it. When the morning came,—  
I don't know what it was got into my head,—  
I sneaked back into the churchyard just for luck —  
To see if I'd got the sods on straight, and rake  
The dirt away. And what do you think I saw?  
That grave was just as if I'd never dug there!  
Healed over — like the grave I saw in the dream! . . .

Now then, you, over there! you say this Punch  
Had something noble in him; tell me, will you —  
What kind of a man is this, who comes from nowhere,  
Runs through the town like fire, and when he's buried  
Skips from the grave, and takes his coffin with him!  
Angel or devil, maybe, but no mortal —  
Nor angel, either! And I make no riddles.  
Believe or not, that's what I saw. You've only  
To take a spade, and dig, to prove me wrong. . . .

And it's no sacrilege to dig for devils.

## WHAT PUNCH TOLD THEM

Punch in a beer-house, drinking beer,  
Booms with his voice so that all may hear,  
Bangs on the table with a red-haired fist,  
Writhes in his chair with a hump-backed twist,  
Leers at his huge nose, in the glass,  
And then proclaims, in a voice of brass:  
Let all who would prosper and be free  
Mark my words and listen to me!  
Call me a hunchback? call me a clown?  
I turned the universe upside down!  
And where is the law or love or chain  
That can't be broken by nerve or brain?

Of all my troubles-my-wife was first!  
If once I loved her, at last I cursed!  
I stole her out of her father's house,  
Kissed her, made her my lawful spouse,—  
And loved her, too, for a certain season . . .  
And where's the woman who loves in reason?  
She dogged me up; she dogged me down;  
She tracked my footsteps through the town;  
Kissed me, clung to me; asked for more;  
'Punch, do you love me?'—till I swore  
I'd break her neck! I'd fling her away!  
Or sail to a foreign land and stay . . .  
You've all got wives—now listen to me,  
Learn how a man can go scot free!

Did I slit her gorge with a carving-knife —  
Offer the hangman's noose my life?  
Not Punch! — There are ways and ways to kill,—  
Some take courage and some take skill . . .  
Poor Judy's dead — and the constables think  
She fell downstairs — but here, I wink!  
Yes, sirs, there's ways and ways of dying,  
Some with wailing and some with crying;  
But some of us die in the dead of night  
With never a sound in the candlelight.  
They stretched her out in a coffin small,  
They hid the coffin under a pall,  
And the mourners came all dressed in black,  
Shouldered it, each with bending back,  
And carried it out. . . . I sat apart  
And wiped my eyes and broke my heart —  
Oh, yes! and each 'Poor Punch!' he said  
As he saw me weep and bow my head.

Well, sirs, it may seem strange to you  
But I was sad, for a day or two —  
I thought of Judy and all she'd been,  
How young she was, and then my sin  
Came in a nightmare to my brain  
And shook my hand with a palsy pain.  
Superstition be damned! said I —  
There's no use moping — we all must die —  
And what does it matter how it's done?  
Weep in roses, or hang in fun!  
And so it happened, and not long after,  
Strutting around with a crooked laughter,  
I met this girl named Polly Prim,  
Dark and devilish, red-lipped, slim,

A virgin harlot, the fame of the place,  
Because no man had kissed her face.  
Now I'm not handsome, as you can see,  
But I've a power with girls in me —  
I take no credit, it's something given,  
Sent to the womb by hell or heaven —  
A trick, a knack, a stab of the eye,  
A twist of the lip, malicious, sly,  
Soft in persuasion, bold in the act —  
No nut's so hard that it can't be cracked!  
You wouldn't think, with a nose like mine,  
Purple and gorgeous with too much wine,  
And a bony hump like a pedlar's pack  
Pushing the coat up off my back,  
You wouldn't think that a man like this,  
Short of murder, could steal a kiss . . .  
And yet I swear, by the devil's dame,  
There's many a girl I've called by name,  
And when I called, by gad, she came!

This Polly, well, she was like them all —  
Ripe red fruit and ready to fall;  
Love her — me? God bless you, no!  
But nevertheless I told her so —  
I smiled to her — whispered, in the street,  
Two words — enough! we arranged to meet  
At the willow tree by the churchyard wall  
As soon as the proper dark should fall.  
Well, I was late — I kept her waiting —  
Nothing better than a bit of baiting —  
And she was vexed and started to go.  
'Polly,' said I, 'I love you so!  
You won't desert me,— now we've started,—

And leave your poor Punch broken-hearted? . . .  
Now look! By Judy's green grave there  
There's none so pretty as you, I swear! '—  
At this she trembled and clung to me  
And rose tip-toe by the wall, to see  
Where Judy's grave was . . . Meanwhile I  
Pretended, furtive, to wipe my eye.  
'Poor Punch!' she sighed, 'your Judy's dead . . .  
Did you love her much?' I shook my head.  
'Not half as much as you,' I said . . .  
'Why do you cry, then?' 'Because I'm lonely.  
Polly I love you, love you only.'  
At this she frowned. 'No doubt,' said she,  
'You said to her what you say to me.'  
She took two steps toward the town,—  
I caught her backward by her gown;  
And what do you think I told her then?  
Oh, there's no limit to the wit of men!  
I told her straight if she'd be brave,  
I'd prove my love by Judy's grave.  
She looked at me with a sudden scare.  
'Come to the grave — I'll kiss you there!'

The night was thick. No moon there was.  
The wind made whickerings in the grass.  
The willows tapped at the churchyard wall  
And we saw, like ghosts, the dead leaves fall.  
'What's that?' said Polly. 'Dead leaves!' said I.  
Close to our heads a bat whizzed by.  
She clung to my arm, her hand was weak,  
She opened her lips but could not speak.  
I stooped and caught her under the knees  
And lifted her up, as light as you please,

Over the wall; but just as I climbed  
To the cold stone top the church clock chimed,  
Then boomed the hour with a thunder-sound:  
And a gravestone keeled with a clap to the ground . . .  
Well, I'm not easily scared, but that,  
Take my word for it, knocked me flat!  
I've danced at murders, laughed at duels —  
But at this my sweat rolled off in jewels!  
Polly looked up at the starless sky  
And covered her face and began to cry;  
She leaned against me and clung and trembled;  
But I, though scared, of course dissembled,—  
I took her arm, and led her then  
Over the weed-wet tombs of men.  
Once, we stumbled upon a spade —  
Thrust in the earth by a vault new-made;  
Once, in the dark, I heard her moan  
As she touched with her hand a dew-cold stone.  
But we came to Judy's grave, and there  
I kissed her eyelids, loosed her hair,  
Swore there was no such thing as sin,—  
And she, being frightened, soon gave in.  
You know I'm honest; I won't pretend  
That I wasn't scared, nor recommend,—  
At least not wholly, to all,— such fashion  
For most enjoying an evening's passion.  
For more than once, at the wail in the trees,  
The heart in my body seemed to freeze;  
And I half expected,— bless my eyes! —  
To see a ghost from the cold grass rise.

So much for Polly. I here pass over  
The days that followed,— days of clover!



But all things end, and the trouble came  
When Polly died,— with me to blame.  
There lived a constable in that town,  
An insolent bully, a red-necked clown,  
With small pig's eyes and stupid face,  
A fool, the laughing-stock of the place.  
He hated me, as I did him,  
Because he loved this Polly Prim . . .  
Why does the good Lord make such fellows?  
He rolled his head and blew like a bellows  
Whenever, as often, he chanced to see,  
On a clear evening, Polly and me  
Walking together along the lane:  
Upon my honour, it gave him pain! . . .  
And once, one evening, as we lay  
With much to do and little to say  
In deep grass by the churchyard wall,—  
We suddenly heard a pebble fall;  
And there he crept in the darkness, groping  
From stone to stone with loud steps, hoping  
To catch us out . . . How still we kept!  
This way and that in the dark he stept,  
Heavily breathing, bending, peering;  
And when at last he was out of hearing,  
Lord how we laughed; and how like flame  
Our kisses after that fright became! —  
Well, on the night that Polly died,  
I sat in the inn, alone. Outside  
The rain came down in glassy sheets,  
I heard it sing and seethe in the streets,  
Green lightning through the windows flashed,  
Thunder along the treetops crashed,  
A shrill wind whistled; and once it seemed

I heard through the wind a voice that screamed . . .  
I knew right well that Pol was dying,  
I stopped my ears, but still that crying  
Rang like a nightmare through my brain.  
Then all at once, through the window-pane,  
I saw this constable's white face stare,  
Stare and vanish. I left my chair,  
My flesh turned cold, for I knew well  
The news the constable came to tell:  
I knew, as well as that light is light,  
Murder had come to town that night.  
The door flew open: in he came,  
With his mouth like wax and his eyes like flame.  
'Good evening, officer,' then said I:  
'Is it raining still?' — There was no reply,—  
For a breath or two; and then he said  
'I suppose you know your whore is dead?'—  
He stared at me: I stared at him . . .  
'I suppose you allude to — Polly Prim?'  
'Allude? You know damned well I do.'  
'A whore is a whore. What's that to you?'  
'You know damned well what it is to me —  
And now you'll settle . . . ' A knife flashed free,  
Flashed in an arc, I ducked, he lunged,  
Down to the floor like an ox he plunged  
With me on top: I caught his wrist,  
Snapped it sharp with a sudden twist,  
His fingers loosened, the knife fell out,  
I caught the haft up, turned about,  
And struck him twice. He gave one moan,  
Clutched once,— and then lay still as stone.

Now, this was folly. . . . I'm free to admit



For once — h'm — anger outran my wit.  
Murder will out! I was straightway tried  
By a jealous judge, and would have died  
Had not my cunning returned to me,  
At the gallows foot, and set me free.  
There was a hangman there, poor wretch,  
A morbid soul by the name of Ketch —  
Jack Ketch; a corpse with a slow green eye  
That only lit when he saw men die.  
No sooner was I condemned, than he  
Conceived a peculiar joy in me:  
Watched me, talked to me; to and fro  
Before my window he would go,—  
For ever touching, as he spoke,  
Hand to gullet, his little joke!  
Now, when the day for the hanging fell,  
He came to the court outside my cell,  
And set up, under my very eyes,  
The gallows! . . . Well, sirs, being wise,  
And having pretended, many days,  
To be a fool, I began to praise . . .  
'Oh, what a pretty tree!' said I,  
And clapped my hands. He rolled one eye  
With a dubious tilt toward me then  
And grinned, and slouched away again.  
Back he came, in a whisper's time,  
With rope and ladder, and started to climb  
To the gallows-top. At this I ran  
To the small cell-window, and began  
To cry 'Stop, thief! — There's a thief out here!  
Robbing the fruit-tree!' — shrill and clear  
I sang this out: Jack Ketch spun round  
And stared at me with never a sound . . .

He looked at me with a pitying look,  
Then once or twice his head he shook,  
Tapped his forehead, tied up his noose,  
Leaving it swinging large and loose,  
Climbed down, and sauntered off once more . . .  
This time, when he came back, he bore,  
(He and the sheriff, on their heads,)  
A coffin, all lapped round with leads . . .  
'Aha!' I cried, with a knowing air;  
'The thieves have fetched a basket there!'—  
Down thy dropped it upon the stones—  
Thump! and a shudder thrilled my bones.

Ketch came to me. 'Now, Punch, step out!'  
'Oh, no!' cried I: 'What's this about?'  
'Come out, sir, and be hanged!' said he,—  
'A pretty fruit for a pretty tree!'—  
'Hanged on a tree—what's that?' said I.  
'Hanged by the neck until you die!'  
At this I wept and beat the stones,  
A mortal terror froze my bones;  
I cried aloud as I was led  
To the gallows foot, already dead . . .  
Jack Ketch began to shine with glee.  
—'Put up your pretty head!' said he—  
'Inside the noose!'—I began to quake,  
The rope came dangling like a snake,  
I touched it, shivered, touched again,  
And took it in my hands, and then,—  
Once more pretending lack of wit,—  
Thrust up my head—outside of it . . .  
'Oh, no!' said Ketch—'inside, inside!'  
'Inside of what?'—Again I tried,

And failed again. At this he swore.  
'Now, Punch, watch me, and try once more!'  
He held the noose above his crown  
And then with his two hands dropped it down,—  
And quick as a wink I hauled him high,  
Hauled him dangling against the sky,  
Knocked down the sheriff, turned and ran,  
Once more a free and happy man!

Oh, Lord, oh, Lord, what things I've done!  
What tricks have played, what devil's fun!  
With many a death my hands are red;  
Many a heart for me has bled;  
Many a tear has fallen for me  
From woman's golden praying-tree!  
I will not say I've not at times  
Fled from the darkness of my crimes:  
Sometimes with sin and sickness faint,  
On my poor knees before some saint,  
I've wept the blackness of my heart  
And vowed a better life to start . . .  
Yet I confess each saint was human,  
Some not too proud or holy woman,—  
And not too proud for earthly blisses,  
Laughter, and moonlight sport, and kisses! —  
What girls have held their hands to me!  
What mouths to touch, what eyes to see!  
Yet something's in me, something strange,  
That drives me on to seek for change;  
I love for a little and not for long —  
And walk my ways then with a song.  
Some hold — and I will not deny —  
It's not of a mortal birth am I:

I wailed not from a woman's womb,  
Nor am I destined for the tomb . . .  
Some hold, who've known the things I've done,  
I am the devil's only son . . .  
But this I doubt . . . For once I saw  
Old Nick himself with tail and claw,  
On a green hillside in the dusk  
Where the wild roses were in musk.  
With Doctor Faustus by him there,—  
Bearing a black book, pale as care,—  
He paced the grass; his eyes were coal;  
He sought to snare my immortal soul.

It was, I say, as evening fell.  
The sky was green. A silver bell  
Sang in the vale, and all fell still  
As Satan smoked across that hill.  
I lay in the grass and sucked a straw  
And schemed how I might thwart the law,  
When suddenly, lifting up my eyes,  
I saw him red against the skies.  
Lord, what a start it gave to me!  
'Good evening, Mr. Punch!' said he . . .  
And at those words, like whips of flame,  
A dark cloud on that hillside came,  
The shapes of rocks began to change,  
The trees seemed sinister and strange,  
They stirred upon their stems, and eyes  
Peered out from under leaves, and cries  
Flew bodiless upon that air  
In angry jargon everywhere;  
And though I looked a long while down  
I saw no valley, saw no town.

Old Nick himself was nowhere then,  
Although I heard his voice again  
Out of the dark in swollen tones  
Like fall of subterranean stones:  
'Consider well what you shall see  
And make your bargain here with me!'—  
Then Faustus, with a hand that shook,  
Turned the great pages of his book,  
As if he turned the stars; and first  
A flood of light around me burst;  
And in a valley by a sea  
Bound by invisible veins to me  
All in the twinkling of an eye  
A town went glistening towards the sky,  
With walls and towers and clustered trees  
And swarms of men there thick as bees . . .  
Then Faustus, tremulous with great age  
Turned like a sheaf of sky that page,—  
Valley and sea were rolled away . . .  
I saw myself, at the end of day,  
Climb up a peaked and verdant hill  
Beside the twinklings of a rill;  
And there a rock I saw; and there  
A voice was heard upon that air  
Saying, 'Smite once!' and in my hand  
There grew, as out of the air, a wand,  
And once I smote. And straight there came  
Out of the rock a crimson flame,  
And out of the flame, naked and fair,  
Venus herself, with golden hair.  
Upon white daisies there she stepped  
And first she shivered, and then she wept,  
And then through her hair she smiled at me,

And sidelong came; but suddenly  
Like time itself that luminous page  
Flashed, and I saw that archimage  
Spread out his ancient hands, and look  
Grimacing upward from his book.  
'You see now, Mr. Punch,' he said,  
'What power we hold. Even the dead  
Rise upward through the trammelled grass  
If we command. All comes to pass,  
As we desire!'—'Then let me see,'  
Said I, 'if such a thing can be!'—  
He turned his huge page once again . . .  
And now I saw a level plain  
Far as the eye could see, and there  
Were graves and tombstones everywhere.  
And all those graves and tombs were still,  
Motionless as the dead, until  
There rose, as out of the earth, a cry  
Wavering slowly to the sky;  
And suddenly then, but without sound,  
Those stones fell softly to the ground,  
Millions of tombs divulged their dead . . .  
With clapping arm and pallid head  
Against a sky of sunset flame  
Out of the trammelled grass they came,  
Stirred like a forest in the wind,  
Flourished their bones, till, somehow thinned,  
They seemed to blow along that sky  
Like hosts of withered leaves, that fly  
Before a stream of air; and then  
Dwindled, fell down, lay still again . . .  
Then Faustus said: "The time has come:  
Sign here your name, set here your thumb!"



All power will Satan give to you  
If, dying, you will repay the due.”  
‘My soul, you mean?’—‘I mean your soul!’  
‘Then may my heart turn black as coal  
Before I serve, eternally,  
Any such tyrant fiend as he!’—  
At this a roiling cloud of smoke  
Burst from the grass, and Satan spoke  
And burned before me on that hill.  
‘Surrender now,’ he cried, ‘your will!’  
I reached to earth, and seized a stone,  
And flung it straight; and, all alone,  
Saw how he melted in that air  
With ancient Faustus by him there;  
Before it struck I saw him pass;  
The stone fell softly to the grass . . .  
And there in the grass I sucked a straw  
And schemed how I might thwart the law.

What is it, in a woman’s skin,  
So surely drives a man to sin?  
What is it, in a woman’s eyes,  
No sooner laughed in than it dies? . . .  
The loveliest lady in that town  
Was she, who wore a green silk gown,  
The baker’s wife, a haughty dame,—  
And it was sweet to bring her shame!  
The first time, when I smiled at her,  
She curled her lip and did not stir . . .  
The second time, she gleamed at me  
Through narrowed eyes, amusedly.  
The third time—she went quickly by,  
But there was laughter in her eye.

I turned to look and she turned too —  
And she was surely mine I knew.  
The fourth, I met her by a stream  
Reading a book, but half in dream:  
It was an afternoon in spring —  
We might have heard the blackbird sing.  
She talked uneasily, laughed at me,  
Picked up her book, but let me see  
She more than liked to have me there:  
And dropped her book and primped her hair.  
I leaned and caught one fingertip,  
Playfully squeezed it, let it slip  
Into the grass again . . . We lay  
And breathed and smiled, no word to say.  
The fifth — I met her late at night.  
Her eyes were dark in lantern-light.  
I caught her arm and pressed it twice  
And felt her hand as cold as ice . . .  
‘Pauline, come out to walk with me!’  
She shook her head. ‘Oh, no!’ said she —  
Her opened lips were grey with pain,  
Backward and forward along the lane  
She looked, afraid lest we be seen.  
‘Oh, no!’ said she — but did she mean  
No with her voice, yes with her heart? . . .  
I took her hand as if to start  
And suddenly she began to cry,—  
Yet came with me . . . ‘Pauline,’ said I,  
‘Lift up your mouth!’ Once more, at this,  
She shook her head . . . yet took my kiss,  
Shut both her eyes, clung hard to me,  
And closer leaned with breast and knee . . .  
Above black trees the moon swam high



And small white clouds were in the sky;  
The lilac-heads were sweet; we crept  
Past houses where the good folk slept  
Into a garden; a silver light  
Flared through the trees, and dimly bright  
Were pool and grass and garden walk;  
And there we sat to kiss and talk;  
And there, beneath that poplar tree,  
She gave her trembling heart to me . . .  
The sixth, by all odds, was the best —  
By this her conscience was at rest;  
She smiled at me as if to say  
‘Do not persuade,—but have your way.’  
It was a sun-stilled afternoon,  
The brook flashed fire. A sliver of moon  
Seemed, like an icy ghost, to melt  
In warm blue sky . . . Her heart I felt  
Thumping beneath my palm. We stayed  
A sweet while there in the poplar shade:  
She told her secrets, every one,  
And of her husband we made fun.  
The seventh — she began to cling,—  
And fiddled with her wedding ring . . .  
‘O! we were monstrous sinners both,  
And we should part!’ But she was loth  
To come to this; so clung to me  
Almost, perhaps, too tenderly . . .  
The eighth and ninth — my joy was mixed.  
Our kisses over, straight she fixed  
Her blue eyes on my heart, to say,  
Since I had led her so astray,  
And made her loathe her husband — why,  
If I should leave her she would die!

At this, you'll easily conceive,  
My one wish was, of course, to leave . . .  
And though I kissed her, stroked her, smiled,  
Tickled her chin, and called her 'child,'  
Sidelong she peered askance at me,  
Her eyes grew dark,—and she could see  
Plainly as pebbles in the brook  
The secret thoughts beneath my look.  
'What are you thinking, girl?' I said,—  
Sharply she turned away her head,  
Compressed her lips, was still a space  
Put up one hand against her face,—  
And then in a queer tone, forced and low,  
Said, 'Nothing — only, it's time to go.'  
And then cold fury rose in me  
And we walked homeward silently.

Well, sirs, it was that very night,  
Brooding alone by candlelight,  
My queerest of all adventures came . . .  
I sat and sulked. My thoughts, like flame,  
Licked up my memories of Pauline,  
Calling her vulgar, plain, obscene,  
Coarse-fleshed, a dull and nagging thing,  
Conquered only to crawl and cling.  
Why do they change? . . . Why lags desire? . . .  
Resentment in me like a fire  
Roared on the tinsel of those days,  
Consumed them all. I walked those ways  
By every leaf and stone again,  
And every leaf was a leaf of pain,  
And every stone lay cold in me  
Or fell through depths of agony.

Was there in all this wide world never  
One woman I might love for ever?  
Or if that miracle could not be,  
One woman who might tire of me  
Before I tired, and fling me by:  
One woman lustrous as the sky,  
Girdled with stars, set round with light,  
Whose heart was music, whose eyes were night?  
Who moved like a sea wave in the wind;  
Transfiguring all things when she sinned?  
This was absurd—I laughed at this!  
What woman would dare refuse my kiss?  
What queen, indeed, could tire of me? —  
And yet, if such a queen might be . . .  
Beautiful, haughty, perilous, wise . . .  
What rarer sport, what nobler prize?  
At this I must have slept; for when  
My puzzled eyes unclosed again  
The room seemed darker,—large, and strange;  
Even as I looked, it seemed to change;  
And as I marvelled, straight I heard  
Close to my ears one whispered word —  
'Sheba!'—said once. And then I saw  
Old Nick himself with tail and claw  
Come back again. Beside me there  
He marvellously emerged from air  
First horns and head, then tail and limb,  
Upward, as one might softly swim  
From shadowy depths . . . One gleaming hand,  
Even before I saw him stand,  
Still bodiless, he stretched to me . . .  
'So, Punch, you've called my name,' said he,—  
'And here I am!'—His dark mouth grinned.

Within those walls was a tempest wind.  
The candle guttered. His glowing face  
Filled with a ghostly shine that place.  
'Listen!' said he . . . and as he spoke  
Those walls, no solider than smoke,  
Seemed slowly streaming on dark air . . .  
'There is one woman wise and fair,  
More marvellous than her you dream.  
This is my bargain — this my scheme.  
You shall be borne through time and space  
To feed your soul upon this face:  
If you can win her you are free;  
But if you fail,— you come to me!'—  
My heart beat loudly. 'Done!' said I . . .  
From all the elements rose a cry,  
Water and fire and wind and earth  
Joined in a frenzied scream of mirth.  
Punch or the Devil — they should see  
Which was the better man to be! . . .

All in the twinkling of his eye  
I crossed blue seas of whistling sky.  
The clamor died behind me. Soon  
By Sheba's gate, under a moon,—  
Against which palm-trees black as jet  
Fringed in a giant silhouette,—  
Along a path of silver sand  
I walked, with stars on either hand.  
Beneath the palm-trees fountains splattered,  
Luminous fishes flashed and scattered,  
Leaving behind them streaks of fire  
And bubbles of light. . . . The moon pushed higher,  
And through black branches, quick as flame,

Luminous parrots went and came,  
And fiery feathers drifted down . . .  
Lord, what a place for me, a clown!  
I skipped along that path; and there  
Flew marvellous music on that air,—  
Slow horns and cymbals, and the sound  
Of many dancers whirling round.  
And then my heart stood still in me:  
By the flaming doorway I could see,  
Two giants, black as stone, and tall  
As pine trees, one by either wall.  
Like fiery moons their eyes they rolled;  
They roared at me; my brain went cold;  
But in between them, nothing daunted,  
I capered up those stairs, and flaunted,  
Wagging the hump upon my back,  
Into the court . . . Lord, what a pack  
Of men and women jostled there!  
Sheba sat in a golden chair  
Set high upon a glittering throne  
Of jewelled and silvered ivory-bone.  
A fan of peacocks' feathers waved  
Before her eyes. The floor was paved  
With golden moons and stars of blue;  
Vermilion birds about her flew;  
And out of the air dissolving sweet  
Fell music with persuasive beat.  
And then I saw how one by one  
Great mages filed before that throne,—  
Upon their knees went humbly down  
Scholar and prince with book and crown;  
To all she smiled, denied them all,  
Vainly before her did they fall.

The Duke of Lorraine trembled there;  
King Solomon, too, with snow-white hair;  
Herod the Great hung down his head,  
And Virgil, pallid as the dead;  
Judas Iscariot, dark of eye,  
Pulled at his chin and shuffled by . . .  
And last of all that host came I! —  
Lord, how I shook! She smiled at me . . .  
And in her eyes as in a sea  
Of fire and darkness I went down:  
In froth of moonlight seemed to drown:  
Whirled in a wave of music, spun  
In ravelling fiery threads of sun!  
Where was I? . . . Was I shivering there? . . .  
A roar of laughter smote that air,  
The mages shook their sides with glee,  
Queens and madmen laughed at me.  
Solomon laid his crown aside  
And clapped his hands: and Judas cried;  
And Heliogabalus sobbed aloud . . .  
White anger froze my veins. I bowed  
Coldly, to all — and all fell still,  
Except one laugh that trailed out shrill  
Then died away. 'Great queen!' I said —  
And paused. She leaned her golden head,  
With one white hand beside her ear:  
'Louder!' she said — 'I cannot hear!' —  
And slowly smiled — and as she smiled  
Smaller and foolisher than a child  
I seemed. I cleared my voice, and then —  
'Great queen!' began, — and once again  
Forward she leaned and smiled at me,  
In grave and sweet perplexity,



And raised one small hand, crystal-clear,  
Once more to touch her jewelled ear.  
And then, behind my back, I heard  
Laughter subdued, a tittered word,  
A stir of mirth . . . I turned and glared,—  
Saw solemn faces ill prepared;  
Saw twisting mouth and shifting eye.  
So Sheba's deafness was a lie!  
And quick as a wink I turned, I climbed  
Those ivory steps. Clear laughter chimed,  
Confusion rose. Beside her throne  
I leaned, I roared in a tempest tone  
'Sheba, my name is Punch! I stand  
With power of darkness in my hand,—  
Power to shake your kingdom down,  
To crack your heart and break your crown!'  
And then as I stood quaking there,  
Feeding upon her eyes, her hair,  
Amazing drunkenness waved in me:  
I gallantly hopped upon her knee,  
I kissed her mouth! and straight arose  
A clamour of cries, and silence froze,  
And Sheba, quivering backward, weak,  
Tried once, and twice, and thrice, to speak;  
And flushed; and stared; and laughed; and then —  
Put up her mouth to kiss again! . . .

At once sweet music thrilled the air!  
Heliogabalus tore his hair!  
Solomon raged and broke his crown,  
Vermilion birds flew singing down,  
Horns and cymbals stormed at the wall  
And a dancing madness took them all.

All night they danced . . . and all night through  
Vermilion parrots clanged and flew . . .  
The walls were shaken with song and glee  
While Sheba lay and smiled at me.  
And through her eyes I went and came  
Now like an ice-thing, now like flame,  
A thousand times . . . Before us waved  
A peacock fan . . . the floor was paved  
With golden moons and stars of blue . . .  
And dancers danced there, all night through.  
And day by day and night by night  
I dwelt there in amazed delight,  
King of that golden mountain-land  
With slaves to bless my least command.  
Take this! fetch that! . . . An old guitar,  
The blue dust falling from a star,  
Pearls for Sheba or wine for me,  
Or coral bleeding from the sea,—  
No matter what; for quick as a wink  
It came, before I'd time to think.  
How Sheba smiled! and how she laughed!  
And oh, what cups of wine she quaffed,  
And how we danced and how we sang,  
And how that glittering palace rang  
With music under the rosy moon  
Of horn and cymbal and bassoon!  
Heliogabalus was my slave,  
And Judas nightly from his grave  
Rose with a sheet about his loins  
To dance before us for copper coins,  
Weeping, weeping for his sins  
To a cheerful tune from violins . . .  
Mermaids came with rainbow fins,



Sea-weed-bearded kings of the sea  
Showered rich tribute there for me,—  
Dead men's treasure of gold and stones  
Was swept away before our thrones.  
And once — one evening — tired of this,  
Yes, tired for once of Sheba's kiss,  
Tired of purple and gold, and cries  
Of parakeets with crimson eyes,  
Musicians beating perpetual drums  
And diamonds brushed away like crumbs,  
Tired of this, with joy I listened  
To a mermaid's voice; her blue eyes glistened,  
Cold as the sea were her eyes, and deep,  
And walking like one who walks in sleep  
I went with her, I followed her down  
Great stairs of stone to a royal town  
With towers of sea-shell filigree  
By glow-worms lit in the gloom of the sea;  
And amber walls, and streets of sand . . .  
The blue-eyed mermaid took my hand:  
Silver dolphins with eyes of flame  
Snoring fountains about us came,  
Crabs whose backs were pearl-encrusted  
And ancient turtles diamond-dusted;  
All the dark kingdom came to rout us  
And oh! what a dance was danced about us! . . .  
Until, at the break of the blue sea-day,  
Up coral stairs I hurried away,  
Once more to Sheba, the scarlet queen,  
Who danced with bells and a tambourine,  
Who poured black wine, and sang to me  
Till I forgot that queen of the sea. . . .

Well, sirs, all things will come to an end,—  
Old Nick, you know, is no man's friend . . .  
How long I stayed, I don't know now —;  
But back I came,— I don't know how,—  
To go my daily rounds again  
With red birds darting through my brain . . .  
Yes, sirs, there's many a thing I've done —  
I've had my fling, I've had my fun:  
No man or devil has bested me,—  
Clap me in jail, I soon go free!  
Even the inquisition came  
And marked a cross against my name,  
And locked me howling into a prison  
Because I denied their Christ had risen!  
But did I stay there? . . . Not a bit.  
There's always a way for nerve and wit!  
A man's wit is a golden key  
To open the door and set him free . . .  
And Death — how many times I've fought him! —  
How many lessons I have taught him!  
The first time — I was in my bed:  
Naked I fought him, cracked his head,  
And drove him, moaning, into the street . . .  
Death! Do you think he's hard to beat?  
Why once, when I was young and strong,  
I chased the varlet all day long,—  
Up hill and down, by vale and shore,  
And into the sea! It made me roar  
To see those lean shanks rise and fall,  
To hear him rattle across a wall,—  
To hear him crying aloud for breath . . .  
Even old Nick is worse than Death! . . .  
And want and weariness — well, these too

Will somewhere lie in wait for you;  
And sickness like a black dog comes  
To whine at the table and beg for crumbs . . .  
Yet here you see me — a mortal man:  
And what I've conquered,— all men can!

. . . A mortal man . . . Though I'll not say  
That some time, after the end of day,  
You might not see me, a giant size,  
Hurling a shadow against the skies . . .  
Blotting the stars . . . at one step taking  
A hill or a town . . . the whole earth shaking . . .  
And I'll not say that the time must come  
When Death will find me, and leave me dumb!

## WHAT POLLY ONCE CONFESSED

“Since you insist, you fool, why then, I’ll tell you . . .  
Love Punch? Good Lord! I hope I’m not so silly!  
Red-nosed, with hands like hams, humpbacked and bandy,—  
And small green rheumy eyes! I’d sooner love  
The wildman that they showed us in the circus!  
Him with the ring in his nose, and the leaves in his hair,  
And the long arms like a gorilla’s always dragging!  
Love him! . . . Don’t make me laugh. I’ll crack the mirror.  
But since you insist (and I can see you’re hungry  
As all men are, sooner or later, in love,  
To root among my muddy secrets, snuffling  
Above them with a leering satisfaction)  
Why then, I’ll tell you. Hate me if you want to.  
The whole thing comes to one word — jealousy! . . .  
And I won’t say that as I look back on it,  
And all that came from it of lies and hatred,  
I don’t, sometimes, feel fifty kinds of fool . . .  
You’ve heard of jealousy? How wise you are!  
Well, then, you know how blind and cruel it is,  
How like a cramp it shuts about the heart  
And turns the blood to poison, and so sends it  
Creeping into the brain for schemes of torture.  
Judy and I were jealous — that’s the story.  
Why were we? God knows! ask me something easy.  
We do things, feel things, sometimes, without knowing  
The reason why. As far as I remember  
I hated Judy — Judy hated me.  
At five years old she stuck her tongue out at me;

At ten years old we pulled each other's hair;  
At fifteen — well — she stole my sweetheart from me.  
We had a way of smiling at each other —  
So innocent it seemed, and oh so sweet! —  
That had the basilisk beaten to a frazzle.  
Look, I can do it still, I've had such practice! —  
We lowered our lids—like this—; and smiled—like  
this! . . .

So, we grew up. And one fine day this Punch  
Came roaring into town, with all his stories  
Of women weeping for him, dying for him,  
And all the rest. Of course, no one believed him —  
No one, that is, but Judy! We all saw  
The coward that he was,— a mouse for courage,  
Ran if you raised your voice! But Judy, somehow,  
(Though, to be sure, she never was too clever)  
Believed him: yes, she thought him *so* romantic,  
Oh, so unusual! And she lost no time  
In setting after him . . . Oh, well, you know  
What fools men are — (You're one yourself) — and Punch  
Was no exception, rather worse than most:  
Crazy for love, went smirking around women  
Tongue hanging out, his little eyes revolving  
In search of titbits — fawning, leering, sidling;  
And knowing this, of course, we laughed at him . . .  
So Judy found him easy: though I won't say  
She didn't use the few wits God had lent her.  
Before he knew it, Punch had been seduced,—  
Trussed up and married . . . Gone — another hero!

Now for confession. And it's not so easy  
As kissing under aspen leaves in moonlight.  
First, as for Punch, I will confess I liked him —

Well, more than half! Repulsive, ugly, bestial,  
Coward and sneak — I knew him all these things,  
As who could not. But still, there was about him  
When he was young, as then he was, some presence,  
Some swagger of the flesh, vivid and subtle,  
That could not help but make a woman's body  
Tingle with secret pleasure. There you have it!  
You see us now, girls, spinsters, and old women,  
Watching behind our shutters when he passed:  
Shuddering with a pleased ecstatic horror  
If he should speak to us or smile to us;  
And yet, oh, hating him! Sometimes I think  
It's not the saint we love men for, but satyr:  
The mouth too loose with constant lippish thinking  
Of fevered kisses, and the little eyes  
Malicious and provocative that smear you  
With drivel of desire. It's true we hate him,  
Yet hate, sometimes, is not so unlike love:  
We try to scorn him out, to laugh him down,  
Yet feel our features changing, under his,  
To mirror him . . . our mouths grow loose as his,  
Corruption thrills the flesh. Unless we shriek  
And break the spell, we're one more atom lost  
In the terrific maelstrom of the blood.  
Punch had the satyr's face, the satyr's body,  
The twinkle of shrewd eyes, the wag of the leg,  
That stiffens flesh. I hated him — and liked him.  
You see then how I felt, when Judy came  
And sighed, and smiled, and whisperingly confided  
(All to enrage me!) how she'd caught her monster —  
Limed the leaves, led him into the chamber . . .  
You see then how I laughed and tweaked her ear,  
Patted her hand and said 'You clever Judy!'



With furies in my heart: I could have killed her . . .  
Poor fool! she might as well have said in words  
What with her snaky smile she said so plainly —  
'I've beaten you at last!'—

I smiled, of course . . .

But none the less revenge was coiling in me  
With watchful eyes. And while the vixen snickered  
Secretly there beside me, I was thinking  
Already of this satyr, Punch, her husband,  
And of her ruin through him. Give me credit!  
Oh, give me credit! I am sometimes clever.  
I saw the whole thing through from start to finish!  
I saw a moonlit garden in my mind,  
With Punch there, like a satyr, trampling lilies,  
Wallowing among lilac leaves, and snorting,—  
Or whining, rather,—his bristly passion for me:  
Lifting his great red hands up in the moonlight  
Under my window: or coming over the wall  
With one leg up, and anguish on his face,  
And the moon behind his head — just like a halo!  
Fantastic sight! I was already laughing.  
The moon herself might well turn red to see it.  
And as for Judy — I saw her at her window  
Waiting for Punch, alone and cold in the moonlight,  
With little hard-fixed eyes distilling poison . . .  
Rapture! I almost loved her at that moment.

"Why bore you with details? You need no telling  
How women do such things. You know me well,  
Know all my tricks, know how I laugh or twitter,  
Smile timidly with dark eyes gleaming sidelong,  
Let fall my hand,—as if in carelessness,—

Upon your arm; or lean one breast against you  
To whisper you some most ingenuous secret!  
H'm! . . . Magic! . . . Magic of flesh! You too have felt it  
And thrilled to it. You've heard it in the evening  
Shaking a devilish music in the darkness  
Of passionate thought; bats are abroad in gardens;  
The grass is soft to lie on; and the moonlight  
Goes over you like hands. Can flesh resist it?  
Poor foolish flesh! pour wine for pigs and bears,  
Get them so drunk they cannot stand, but squeal  
Lying upon their helpless backs, and blinking  
At fifteen suns: their drunkenness is nothing  
To the helpless lunacy of human flesh  
Tipsy with lust. You've seen it crawl and slaver,  
You've seen it dance its idiot dance in moonlight  
With eyes upturned so imbecile and wistful:  
And, oh, what caperings! . . . Well, then, for spite  
And little else (except what I've confessed)  
You see me, in a green gown, leaning slowly  
To play on Punch these delicate fleshly harpings.  
You see me dance with him while Judy watches,  
Her blue eyes darting hatred among swift dancers,  
Following us, in lazy convolutions,  
Among the chords and discords . . . You can see  
The panic heartbeats in those eyes of hers,  
For all their cruelty . . . The girl is frightened . . .  
She sees Punch smile at me — in a way she knows!  
She sees the twitchings of his hand behind me —  
Against my flesh! She sees his eyes turned upward  
In an ecstatic misery all too plain . . .  
Oh, Lord, those eyes of his! They gave me nightmares.  
I almost spoiled the whole thing more than once,  
By laughing in his face.



“ Well — there’s the story.

A few weeks passed and Punch was in my garden  
Just as I thought he would be; trampling lilies,  
Heaving his crooked shoulder over the wall  
Against the moon, wallowing in my lilacs:  
While Judy sat afar and waited for him.  
Sweet triumph! How I laughed and told the neighbours!  
See the red monster eating from my hand!  
The wildman come from his cave, his bones and berries,  
To waltz on his hindlegs in obedient circles!  
I give him a fan to hold, he snuffs and paws it,  
Goes home with the perfume on him, passion-draggled,  
Grunts my name in his sleep . . . Too sweet a triumph! . . .  
For now poor foolish Judy, struck with horror  
Failed to come forward fighting — what I hoped for:  
Instead, with one scared look, she stepped down backward  
Into the dark. I mean, she killed herself.  
Not out of love for Punch! Oh, no. I’m certain.  
But out of broken pride. Yes, simply that.  
And left me feeling, somehow, somewhat foolish.

You see, then, how much truth is in his story —  
You see how much I loved him . . . There! I’ve told you  
The whole thing through, for you to sniff and snort on.  
Isn’t it pretty? . . . Romance, with all its graces!  
Go on, be jealous now,—hate Punch! hate me!  
Tear out my heart, defile the sacred image  
Of Punch that’s graven there! . . . And when you’re  
finished —

How do you like the way I’ve done my hair? ”

## HOW HE DIED

When Punch had roared at the inn for days  
The walls went round in a ringing haze,  
Miriam, through the splendour seen,  
Twinkled and smiled like Sheba's Queen,  
Jake was the devil himself, the host  
Scratched in a book like a solemn Faust;  
And the lights like birds went swiftly round  
With a soft and feathery whistling sound.  
He seized the table with one great hand  
And a thousand people helped him stand,  
"Good-night!" a thousand voices said,  
The words like gongs assailed his head,  
And out he reeled, most royally,  
Singing, amid that company.—  
Luminous clocks above him rolled,  
Bells in the darkness heavily tolled,  
The stars in the sky were smoothly beating  
In a solemn chorus, all repeating  
The tick of the great heart in his breast  
That tore his body, and would not rest.

Singing, he climbed the elusive street,  
And heard far off his footsteps beat;  
Singing, they pushed him through the door,  
And he fell full length on the darkened floor . . .  
But his head struck sharply as he fell  
And he heard a sound like a broken bell;  
And then, in the half-light of the moon,

The twittering elvish light of June,  
A host of folk came round him there,—  
Sheba with diamonds in her hair,  
Solomon thrumming a psaltery,  
Judas Iscariot dark of eye,  
Satan and Faustus and Lorraine,  
And Heliogabalus with his train . . .  
The air was sweet with a delicate sound  
Of silk things rustling on the ground,  
Jewels and silver twinkled, dim,  
Voices and laughter circled him . . .

After a while the clock struck two,  
A whisper among the audience flew,  
And Judy before him came and knelt  
And kissed him; and her lips, he felt,  
Were wet with tears . . . She wore a crown,  
And amethysts, and a pale green gown . . .  
After a while the clock struck three  
And Polly beside him, on one knee,  
Leaned above him and softly cried,  
Wearing a white veil like a bride.  
One candle on the sill was burning,  
And Faustus sat in the corner, turning  
Page after page with solemn care  
To count the immortal heartbeats there.  
Slow was the heart, and quick the stroke  
Of the pen, and never a word he spoke;  
But watched the tears of pale wax run  
Down from the long flame one by one.  
Solomon in the moonlight bowed,  
The Queen of Sheba sobbed aloud;  
Like a madonna carved in stone

Judy in starlight stood alone:  
Tears were glistening on her cheek,  
Her lips were awry, she could not speak.  
After a while the clock struck four,  
And Faustus said "I can write no more:  
I've entered the heartbeats, every one,  
And now the allotted time is done."  
He dipped his pen, made one more mark,  
And clapped his book. The room grew dark.  
At four o'clock Punch turned his head  
And "I forgive you all," he said. . . .

At five o'clock they found him dead.

PART II

MOUNTEBANK CARVES HIS PUPPET OF WOOD



## HE CONCEIVES HIS PUPPET TO BE STRUGGLING WITH A NET

### I

As evening fell, and Punch crept out of the wood  
And saw the valley before him (like my life,  
Stretched out before me, waiting there? he thought)  
And saw the sun go melting redly down  
Behind bare oaks, and the long shadows, fanlike,  
Whirling across the quiet fields, he pondered  
On the simplicity, the tranquil beauty, even,  
Of morning, twilight, afternoon, or noon,—  
So clear by contrast to the nagging jangle  
Of his own days! . . . Dry branches caught his feet,  
The snapping of them teased his brain to folly,  
He clawed at cobwebs that wiped across his cheek,  
Inwardly snarled, was maddened, and once more thought,—  
Letting his restless eyes rove, seeing nothing,—  
His life was a buzzing fly, vainly struggling  
To loose weak wings from the glutinous web of fate.  
How was it other men could live so simply?  
How was it they could love, yet go unscathed,  
Walk freely, laugh, and make it all a story?  
Or did they lie? — The red sun swelled and sank,  
A huge red bubble poised upon the hilltop:  
Vermilion clouds flew over it and faded:  
The sky, from orange, turned pale green, faint blue;  
And the bare boughs of trees, flung up against it,  
Frozen and still and black, seemed like great claws.

## II

Well, then, if others lied, he too would lie . . .  
 These faces of the smiling men he knew,  
 Baker and constable and mayor and hangman,  
 What did they mean? Were they, as they pretended,  
 Such gloating misers of illegal riches? . . .  
 As their imagined faces swam before him,  
 Ruddy or pale, they seemed to avert their eyes,—  
 Like those who close their windows to a burglar.  
 Ah! that was it — they lied. And they, like him,  
 Walked always warily, for fear of nets,  
 Ran hard in darkness when they thought none saw them,  
 And, in their secret chambers, wept for terror.  
 He laughed at this; because he saw so clearly  
 On a dark moonless night, along the street,  
 Half frantic, panting, with his mouth wide open,  
 The white-faced baker speeding from his shadow.  
 Yes, they were liars, all,—and he would lie . . .  
 Although, of course, some things might be accomplished —  
 Even by him . . . even by him, indeed! —  
 He picked a stick up, cracked it with his hands,  
 Smiled at his conscious strength, pressed hard his feet  
 Into the withered grass, and heard life singing;  
 Lights came out of the darkened earth like flowers  
 And swam on the lustrous air . . . they were the lights  
 Of windows in the village, candles behind them . . .  
 And as for women . . . but at the thought of women  
 He thought of Judy only, pale-haired Judy . . .  
 Judy with wide blue eyes, eternal Judy! . . .  
 There was a grave for Judy, and he would dig it;  
 Or had he dug it,—was he digging now,  
 With every thought? — He paused, with step suspended,



In a cool sort of horror; he seemed to feel  
Himself a shovel, used by relentless fate,  
To dig that grave . . . was lifted up and thrust,  
Lifted again . . . He shivered and then stepped forward,  
Seeing the face of Judy eddying down  
On a black coiling current into darkness.  
This was a kind of madness, and he forbade it.

### III

Judy! — Lying beside her in the moonlight  
He feigned a sleep, and turned, and through the window  
Watched how the crooked moon went slowly up  
Among black elm-boughs, driving out the stars.  
And here was Judy sleeping so beside him  
While fate in him, as in a cup, mixed poison.  
Black thoughts, like webs, he softly put around her,  
Quietly back and forth. On her white skin,—  
The moonlight touched one shoulder, made it dazzle —  
He seemed to see these thoughts, like black webs, falling,  
Knitting her fast for death . . . And who, above her,  
Hung like the bearded spider . . . he, or fate?  
And why was she so marked for death at all?  
Of course, if he had nerve, as heroes should have,  
He'd kill her now,— smother her with a pillow,  
Strangle her with his hands, or cut her throat . . .  
But thinking this, his lips grew dry, his hands  
Weakened, his breath was hurried, he closed his eyes  
To shut the hideous room out, known too well,  
And all that went with it . . . himself and Judy . . .  
How would the baker do it, or the hangman?  
Poison? He licked his lips and poured it slowly,

Saw the green bubbles sliding . . . No, not poison . . .  
Judy would know, accuse him before she died,  
Or what was worse, stare at him, in her writhings,  
With new-found horror . . . Darkness closed him in,  
No door of light there was, he seemed imprisoned:  
Chained and encircled . . . He, himself, was helpless.  
All that could help him now was what most bound him —  
Fate . . . and fate, as always, seemed just grinning.

The village clock struck suddenly into his musings . . . .  
Twelve molten golden plummets of slow sound  
Plunged heavily downward in a void of silence,  
Leaving a surge of air . . . He saw the tombstones  
Glistening in the moonlight, ghostly rows,  
And felt, as it were, the earth creep up about him . . .  
Was he a shovel in the hands of fate,  
Digging a grave? Digging a grave for Judy?  
Well, it was strange to think that he had loved her —  
Perhaps still loved her — yet desired her buried!  
When she caressed him next, or stood on tiptoe  
To prim her lips for his, he'd think of this;  
It would be hard, he thought, to meet her eyes . . .  
The moon, by now, had climbed above the elm-tree,—  
Swam freely; through black claws reached after it.  
The stars hummed round it still, though at a distance.  
Would he be ever as free as the moon was, even?  
After a while he slept, and in his sleep  
Dreamed of a grave that opened,—without shovels.

#### IV

Judy in sunlight combed her hair out slowly,  
Tossing her small head backwards. Now her elbows

Flashed in the sun; her blue eyes, in the mirror,  
Sought for his eyes, and smiled; the streaming hair  
Dazzled him. Yet, desiring so to kill her,  
And being afraid, his hatred only hardened,  
His hands, that dared not hurt her, could not touch.  
Did she perceive this? Did some whisper reach her,  
Chilling her blood? She smiled, and went on combing,  
The smile died slowly, meeting no smile for answer,  
The silence deepened, prolonged, seemed fraught with  
meanings.

If she could know the dream he had dreamed last night,  
Of an earthy grave that dug itself beneath her,  
And swallowed her without sound — what would she say?  
Laugh for a moment, perplexed, and hide her trouble,—  
Or think the thing a trifle? — pat his cheek,  
Abuse him, mockingly, for sleeping treason?  
He watched her elbows moving, watched the comb  
Gliding the golden length of hair, and thought  
(First with a start, but after with composure)  
If she could only know one instant, clearly,  
How much he hated her and wished her dead —  
Would she not die, or — even — kill herself?  
Just here, half laughing, Judy turned towards him  
With something on her lips to say: but seeing  
A cold glare in his eyes grew suddenly grave  
And cried “Why, what’s the matter?—” He, surprised,  
Guilty, caught with a red knife in his hands,  
Lowered his eyes, and laughed and said “Oh, nothing! ”;  
And left her staring, large-eyed, after him.  
Even as he left, his guilt had changed to anger.

Yes, there it was — that everlasting net  
Falling upon his brain! He could not move

But it was there before him, softly tangling,  
Meshing his hands and eyes. He hated Judy,—  
The more because she now intruded on him,  
Blundered among his poisons . . . His, or fate's?  
He raged a while. The sunlight was detested.  
Freedom! Who had the thing? This net came softly  
On all he thought and did; desires and hatreds,  
These were the fevers of too-mortal flesh,  
Insuppressible flesh . . . Why love? Why hate? . . .  
Or could one play, with skill, a music on them? . . .  
No, not if one was (as he was) a coward . . .  
He walked on grass, stared at the intricate blades,  
Saw all was interwoven. "So my frailties!"  
He thought, "are interwoven. I am helpless."  
Yet, with a teasing half-smile, he remembered  
That though one might not conquer, one might lie.

## V

Polly had waited for him by the brook —  
Pretending not to. When she saw him coming  
She turned her back and sang . . . Confound the girl!  
Was she avoiding him, or only teasing?  
He stood, half hesitating, looking downward;  
Wondered if she had seen him. His flesh quickened,  
The blood sang brawling melodies in his brain,  
He thought, with lips apart, his chance had come  
To do as other men did (if they did) —  
Fling prudence to the wind and take his pleasure . . .  
The blood sang ribald melodies in his brain.  
His coward heart was hammering at his ribs.  
The sky was blue and birds were singing in it,

Polly was singing, sunlight flashed on the water,  
And he alone seemed sinister under the sky . . .  
Would she resent his hump, make fun of him? . . .  
Desire was strong in him, and he stepped downward.

Polly (the witch) played devil's music on him;  
Teased at the darker currents of his blood  
While seeming not to tease. She chattered, simpered,  
Narrowed her black eyes on him in dark questions,  
Plucked at her dress with lazy fingers, sighed,  
And when she saw the half-cowed tiger rising  
Behind his eyes, leered sidelong at his hump  
(She knew he watched) and froze him to the marrow.  
Basking in sunlight, somehow she contrived  
To strip her body bare,—to lie before him  
In naked loveliness: her clothes were vapour,  
Her beauty burned them off, her flesh sang through them,  
The white skin flashed before him . . . When, half frantic,  
With hearing, seeing, feeling such clear music,  
And blind with a sudden violence not his own  
He flushed, and caught her hand, and tried to kiss her,  
She suddenly laughed. "Now, hunchback, don't be silly!"  
She smoothed her hair, looked at him coldly, frowned,—  
Then rose and walked away . . . He felt like crawling.

## VI

The throbbing music she so played upon him  
Grew, in his dream, to a beauty past all bearing!  
A bright and baleful light in shafts from heaven  
Slanted upon a green hill; trees were shaken,  
The leaves flew down upon it and whirled upon it



As if it were a wind; it swept and thrilled him.  
There, as he built a wall to keep the sea out,  
A mist-white sea that flashed without wave or sound,  
She came before him and lifted her hands and laughed,  
Naked and fair . . . But just as he leaned to take her  
Black webs like rain came ravelling out of the sky,  
Fastened upon her, meshed her, bound her helpless,  
And whirled her away on air. He woke in horror:  
Half doubting if it were Polly after all — ;  
Half hoping, half believing, it might be Judy.

## VII

Waking from this his life seemed somehow changed! . . .  
His body was light; the air seemed singing about him,  
Moonlight roared through the elm-trees like a river,  
The trees seemed ready to walk; even the houses  
Seemed only to pause on earth for a moment, ready  
To tilt on the stellar air and soar away.  
Bewitched again! this time by Polly Prim.  
He desired to dance, and sat up straight in bed  
With gnomes and elves cavorting in his brain;  
And then he remembered how absurd he was,  
And felt his hump, and the stiffness of his legs.  
Well,— whatever the outcome,— this was music,—  
Spring with a million green leaves glistened in him:  
His hate of Judy rose in a smoke of laughter . . .  
Whether she lived or died he could avoid her —  
Why waste his thoughts upon her? Love was better.  
And was it sure the girl was laughing at him?  
Had he, in fact, seemed so ridiculous?  
One instant, he was hot with a throbbing confusion,

His hands were tight. He heard her laughing coldly,  
Saw the clear devilish eyes, and felt like crawling . . .  
With a slight turn and shrug, though, these reflections  
Vanished . . . He felt instead her cool skin touch him,  
And saw himself, the next time at the inn,  
Winking, slapping his knee, and confiding slyly  
To the baker or the hangman how he, Punch,  
(Despite his ugliness — so all too obvious!)  
Had half seduced that Polly Prim already,—  
Boldly touched her knee with his hand, and kissed her,—  
In fact, could have the rest of her for the asking! . . .  
Warm preludes started murmurings in his brain.

## VIII

“No doubt” (he thought) “this web is still around me;  
But Polly weaves it now, and so it glistens,  
It sings about me, I can dance within it . . . ”  
He put his hands out, thinking he might feel it  
Shimmering on the air. If net this was  
It was a pleasant net, and well worth having.  
Wherever it touched it burned . . . He walked within it,  
Remembering, with a bland astonishment,  
How he had railed so, railed at hell and heaven,  
For spreading snares for him. . . . And here was Polly!  
Polly, with sombre hair,—and pale hands lifted  
To play such music on him! — Feeling this,  
(As, swimming, one might feel the cool of water  
In streaks and whorls translucent flowing round him,  
With a slight seethe of bubbles,) he walked gaily,  
Forgetting much. Blue days like flowers gigantic  
Opened above his head, flashed far above him,

Were slowly closed. Birds hung suspended in them,  
Burned in the blue, revolved, or lazily sailed,  
Glided away, were lost. Faint voices thrilled him  
Seeming to echo voices once familiar  
Now half-forgotten, vague, and strange in meaning . . .  
The moon itself,—(blown like a silver bubble  
In the blue air)—seemed but an idle symbol  
Of time and fate, as idle. It passed slowly,  
Merged in a foam of cloud, was softly lost . . .  
Bound as a victim in such web of music,  
Spun to his end in skeins of sound like fire—  
This fate was sweet! It hardly seemed like fate . . .  
Thinking these things, and always seeing Polly  
Dancing before him in a clear depth of sunlight  
(Uncaptured yet—he shivered—) he kissed Judy  
And touched her arm, and smiled, and never winced . . .  
He had forgotten, now, his dream of shovels.

## IX

One morning, meeting Judy on the stairway,  
He noticed,—for the first time,—something strange:  
She eyed him palely, raised one hand, seemed shrinking  
Faintly upon herself to let him pass . . .  
Some threat there was in this—he went more slowly,  
Probing that look . . . What was the woman thinking? . . .  
It was as if, in some way, death were in her  
And looked out through her eyes. It was as if  
He had glanced in through the open door of a tomb  
And seen cold shadow there . . . Was Judy planning  
The death which he himself, in thought, had hoped for?  
Terror came down upon him, his feet were heavy,



The sunlight darkened, he suddenly saw his fate  
(That fate which he himself had set in motion!)  
Moving with sinister speed, looming above him,  
Roaring among his trees! — His hands fell weak,  
His cowardly eyes found nothing they could look at,  
He sat among withered leaves . . . Judy was dying!  
Judy was killing herself! Judy was dead!  
The leaves flew round his feet, dust whirled among them,  
The sun went over the sky, and swelled and sank,  
The hours were struck, all things went on, resistless,  
And he was whirled along with them . . . Well, truly,  
Had he desired her dead, or hinted at it? . . .  
Had he been murderous, even in words? . . .  
Had he looked at her with a look of hatred? . . .  
When he found heart at length, and slowly limped  
Across grey fields, and saw the house, it seemed  
Quietly changed. It seemed to keep a secret.  
Its secret lay on the kitchen floor, in darkness.  
He held a light above her, stared, was speechless.  
Judy had taken poison and was dead.

## X

Polly, upon his anguished summons, came  
To dress his Judy, lay her out in satin,  
And spend the night. He sat, and heard her moving,  
Moving to and fro in the room above him,  
Pulling the curtains down, opening drawers:  
Moving, when she remembered to, on tiptoe . . .  
What was she doing, all this time, up there? . . .  
He wished the floor were glass, that he might see her . . .  
And Judy lying there! He thought of Polly,

Living — and Judy, dead. This living body,  
Turning there in the presence of the dead,  
Bending above it, touching it with warm hands,  
Rising to move away, with clear dark eyes —  
Its beauty dazzled him; his flesh was quickened,  
The blood sang teasing melodies in his brain,  
Provoked a silent cry. Where was he drifting?  
Where was he — rather — being swept, and helpless?  
A gesture of struggle passed like a ghost before him,  
He sank back weakly, knowing his efforts useless;  
And hearing the soft steps ring once more above him  
Surrendered to their music. Flares of pain  
Rose in his heart, but through the pain that music  
Steadily sang . . . He knew himself most ugly,  
And closed his eyes for a moment not to see it.  
Red-faced, lascivious, hump-backed, and a coward!  
Where the strings pulled, he moved. He was a puppet.

When all was still — (still pond and no more moving! —  
The phrase flew into his mind and laughed at him)  
He went upstairs to bed; and the dread thing happened.  
Faint fragrance stirred on the quiet air. At first  
He heard no sound. He found his door and opened,  
And stood there, silent. And as he stood there, trembling,  
(Or was he shivering? for the air was cool)  
Thinking how gross he was, how red and ugly,  
And wondering if he dared to do this thing,—  
With Judy lying dead, there, in her room;  
Or if he had the courage; well, just then,  
Polly came into the hall, and smiled at him,  
Combing her hair . . . She combed her hair and smiled,  
Lazily smiled, tilting her dark head backward,  
Bending her smooth white arms. He stood transfixed . . .

Slow savage chords throbbed in his brain: his mouth  
Too dry for speech, his feet too weak for moving . . .  
“What is it?” Polly asked. His smile was foolish.  
He did not know what answer was intended,—  
Whether she knew what music clashed within him,  
Pretending not to hear it (hearing perhaps  
The same great cymbals in her own dark veins)  
Or whether, if she knew, she only teased him,—  
And hearing him confess, would feign a horror! . . .  
He was afraid . . . “Judy is dead” (he thought)  
“I am alone . . .” he raised his hands to his eyes,  
Pretending a wave of grief. Polly, at this,  
Came to him quickly, stood before him, touched him . . .  
“Now don’t be foolish!”—He looked up, saw her smile,  
(That slow soft smile again! What did it mean?)  
And as he looked she took a slight step backward . . .  
Silence came down upon them. He felt a net  
Falling between them. He desired to move, to break it,  
To touch her warm white body that sang before him,  
But could not stir. If he could lift his hand—  
What could prevent his touching her arms, her hair,  
Her round white throat? . . . Then, as the silence deepened,  
Smiling a little again, she walked back slowly,  
Paused at her doorway—or seemed to pause—one instant,  
To gleam through narrowed eyelids darkly at him,—  
And softly closed her door. . . . What did she mean? . . .  
Should he go after her—knock at the door? . . .  
The loud blood hammered and swelled against his temples,  
Desire and fear confused him. He stood helpless.  
He entered his room, sank wearily on his bed,  
Stared through the window at a night of starlight  
And cursed his fate; and all about was silence. . . .

Judy herself was not more dead than he.

## XI

"Is this the house where Judy lived?"

"Yes,— long ago."

"The house where Judy lived and died?"

"Ah! . . . long ago." . . .

He lay in the dark. Why did this idiot jingle

Keep running in his head? What did it mean?

Had he grown old already? — He clutched the pillow

And looked out through the pale blue square of window

Between black twisted branches at the stars.

Yes. There they were, just as they were before,

Silver and blue and green and twinkling crimson,

Yellow and white . . . they danced and laughed and trembled,

Pirouetted and sang, yet never moved.

And there was Judy, dead, in a darkened room,

Never to comb her hair again, or, laughing

Run down the stairs, or snap the stems of violets. . . .

And here was he, hump-backed and red and bestial,

Driving her through his thoughts; and there was Polly

Sleeping,— or lying awake, perhaps, to smile!

He watched a thin bough, thrust against his window,

Dipping upon the air against the stars

As if it caught them and let them go again . . .

It was a claw. Fate itself was a claw.

His life was full of claws. He was a shovel

Held in such claws . . . and made to dig a grave,

A grave for Judy. And there was Judy waiting . . .

Or was it himself had died and would be buried? . . .

The earth piled up above him, he could not breathe.

"Is this the house where Judy lived?"

"Yes — long ago."

“The house where Judy lived and died?”  
“Ah! — long ago.”

## XII

Polly, he thought, was lying in her room  
Stretched out upon the white bed, straight and slender;  
Her long dark hair spread out upon the pillow.  
Perhaps she lay awake still, gazing vaguely  
Down that white length, and through the tall blue window  
At these same stars . . . perhaps she turned her head  
And lazily closed her eyes, to shut them out . . .  
These thoughts played through his mind like a melody,—  
Glissandos, shimmering downward from the treble  
Sharply to crash among deep chords of passion . . .  
And through these tones the thought of Judy came  
Like freezing silence . . . Judy! . . . Judy! . . . Judy! . . .  
What did the word mean? What had it ever stood for? . . .  
Judy lying alone in a darkened room,  
Her eyelids closed, her hands upon her breast!  
If she could rise, and live again,—he'd hate her . . .  
But dead? . . . He closed his eyes, and in the darkness  
That roiled his mind ran fast through a wind of voices . . .  
If he had killed her it had been unwitting.

## XIII

Unravelling in his dream from vague beginnings,  
Like a melody evolved from muttered tunings,  
These things grew strange in size. Against a wall  
Quivering in a light's unsteady yellow,  
A shadow fell; and Polly stood before him  
Naked and fair. He moved and caught and kissed her,

She half averted her face, she strained away,  
Delirium fused his veins. Then down the stairs,  
Bringing a sort of darkness as they came,  
He heard the steps of Judy ring,— each step  
Spreading a darkness and reverberating.  
Polly was gone. He trembled, he desired to hide,  
He stood by the wall. . . . When Judy came at last,  
Standing before him suddenly,— warm and young,—  
He saw that she was pregnant; and remorse  
Stifled his heart. Ashamed and shy and awkward  
He hesitated towards her, touched her, kissed her,  
Said (what he had not said so long) “I love you!”—;  
Then leaned against the wall and cried like a child.  
She looked at him surprised,— and tenderly,—  
And slowly walked away.

#### Later, his dream

(But after he had waked and stared in anguish  
At the dark ceiling above him, vaguely white)  
Brought him a hidden sound of Polly's laughter,  
The clear notes blown from nowhere. There he seemed  
To run from some one, some one with a knife —  
The constable? — he did not turn to see,  
But ran; till suddenly, thinking he was safe,  
He saw the man before him in a chair  
With his back turned; and stabbed him, then, and killed  
him . . .  
As the man moved his head to look, he woke.

#### XIV

He walked in a rain to see his Judy buried.  
The sky was filled with the slanting spears of rain,



Grey spears of rain. Over the tops of trees  
Whistled the wind-torn clouds. The ruts were gleaming,  
Puddles were ringed and rippled. At the churchyard  
They found the grave already dug, raw earth  
Heaped up beside it, pitted and dark with rain.  
This was the last injustice! This was monstrous.  
They lowered the coffin awkwardly into the grave,  
On the bare resonant boards that hid his Judy  
The rain drummed monotones, wet earth was shovelled;  
And suddenly, able to bear the thing no longer,  
He turned his back, stared at the rain-lashed grass,  
And saw how cruel was life. The church-bell tolled,  
The tones were whirled away as soon as struck,  
Tumbled upon the wind, and lost in rain,  
Or beaten down to the ground. Among worn grass-blades  
Rain-bubbles winked and ran with delicate seething,  
Bare trees whipped in the wind . . . the day was madness.

Dusk fell. He crossed the fields alone. His house  
Looked old and cold and small and time-forgotten.

"Is this the house where Judy lived?"

"Yes,— long ago. . . ."

"The house where Judy lived and died?"

"Ah! — long ago."

He thrust the door, stood in the silent hallway,  
And heard no sound save whir and splash of rain  
And tick of clocks; alone and loud and foolish  
In the slow mouldering and decay of time.

## XV

Through the tall window, on the brown curve of the hill,  
He watched pale silvery arrows of rain descending;



Slow long arpeggios thrilled and chimed in his heart.  
The soft drops brushed on the window and were muted.  
The grey-white sky above him whirled with rain.  
“Well, then . . . if Polly refused me . . . Judy tricked  
me . . .

But *did* they now,— or did I misinterpret? . . .  
No! I should wrong myself if I should think so . . .  
Have I not half seduced the girl already?  
Did I not . . . kill the other?”— Thinking this  
He seemed to feel that horrible net once more,  
But thrust it harshly aside. “No, I am free:  
No man or law or fate can change my purpose,  
No god defeat my will! If, on that hillside,  
Old Nick himself, and Doctor Faustus with him,  
Should spread the world before me, for my soul —  
Setting before me Venus with bright hair,  
Towers of silver, walls inlaid with sapphires,—  
I should refuse. No fate shall take my soul! . . .  
And where is she so proud, who, to my cunning,  
Shall not surrender her crown, her heart, and all? . . .”  
He was tired, he bowed his head; and in a dream  
The Queen of Sheba smiled on a throne before him,  
A far faint clashing of music reached his ears,  
A ghostly pageant of crimson shimmered and smouldered  
And swayingly died away. . . . And death itself  
Went dwindling into the grey rain, only pausing  
At the sky’s edge to lift one menacing arm . . .  
Or was it only a gaunt tree, silhouetted,  
Flinging a long black branch out, one great claw? . . .  
. . . . .

The dark dream spread before him, like a valley  
Made strange with music. Birds flew upward from it;  
Far down flashed moving lights. He closed his eyes

And smiled, and took one step, and then another;  
And groping raised his hands. . . . The air was warm.

This was the valley of forgetfulness  
Where painful thoughts and frustrate deeds would fade . . .  
He saw an orange moon rise, strangely large,  
Above soft trees. Among the unbroken vineyards  
Maenads came out to dance, he heard them singing,  
The leaves swished back behind them, laughter descended . . .  
This was the valley of love and lawlessness;  
Where thirst was quenched, with no satiety,  
And flesh and stream and tree were all immortal.  
Cymbals softly clashed in the moonlit forest  
Far down before him, the undulant air was fragrant  
With flight of ghostly roses; out of the silence, voices  
Rose faint and clear. . . . He slowly descended the hill.

HE IMAGINES THAT HIS PUPPET HAS A DARK DREAM  
AND HEARS VOICES

FIRST VOICE

Pave the sky with stars for Punch!  
And snare in flowers a moon for him  
With white rose-trees and apple trees  
And cherubim and seraphim!

SECOND VOICE

Look! he comes! how tall he is!  
A crown of fire is on his head;  
The sky unrolls before his feet,  
Green mountains fear his tread.

The meteors now like dolphins dive  
Into the white wave of the sky,  
Blue moons and stars around him sing  
And suns triumphant cry!

THIRD VOICE

Build a house of gold for Punch,  
Of gold without and silk within,  
With floors of glass, and let there be  
For ever there a silver din

Of music's many instruments  
In slow and low amazement heard:  
In every window-niche a cage,  
In every cage a singing-bird.

Build it in a kingdom far;  
In a forest green and deep;  
Where no tears nor sorrows are,  
But only song and sleep.

There to the noise of wind in trees  
And many rivers winding down,  
Let him forget the cares of earth  
And nod a kingly crown!

#### FOURTH VOICE

Like a tower of brass is Punch,  
And great and stately is his pace;  
There is no other as tall as he,—  
None with so fair a face.

Fall down, fall down, you kings of men,  
Fall down before him! This is he  
For whom the moon pursues her ghost  
And demons bend the knee.

Woe unto you, you miscreants  
Who dare the lightnings of his eyes!  
His hand, how strong! His wrath, how just!  
His brow, how white and wise!

#### FIFTH VOICE

Solomon, clown, put by your crown,  
And Judas, break your tree:  
Seal up your tomb and burn your cross,  
Jesus of Galilee!

For here walks one who makes you seem  
But atoms that creep in grass;  
You are the pageant of his dream,  
And he will bid you pass.

Let Rome go over the earth in gold  
With trumpets harshly blown!  
For here comes one whose splendour burns  
More gloriously, alone.

Heliogabalus, laugh your last!  
Queen Sappho, lie you down!  
Punch the immortal shakes the seas  
And takes the sun for crown.

#### SIXTH VOICE

Sheba, now let down your hair,  
And play upon it with your hands,  
While girls from Tal and Mozambique  
Parade before in sarabands,—

Play him songs inaudible  
With white hands braceleted and slim,  
Or shake your hair and let it fall  
And softly darken him.

Cling to him, while cymbals far  
Are sweetly smitten in the dusk,  
And maenads, under a haughty star,  
Break the white rose for its musk:

Cling to him, and with your lips  
Feed his heart on crumbs of fire

That shall, perpetually, delight,  
But never slay desire!

SEVENTH VOICE

Open a window on the world  
With all its sorrow, and then  
When he has heard that sound a space,  
Close it fast again. . . .

Sweet will it be, lapped round with ease  
And music-troubled air,  
To hear for a moment on the wind  
A sound of far despair:

And then, to turn to lights again,  
And fingers soft on strings,  
While Sheba slips her bracelets off  
And spreads her arms and sings. . . .

Sweet will it be, to hear far off  
That gusty sound of pain,  
And to remember, far away,  
A world of death and rain:

And then, to close the window fast,  
And laugh, and clap soft hands,  
While girls from Tal and Mozambique  
Parade in sarabands. . . .

Close now the window! Close it well! . . .  
That slow lament of pain  
Was but the dissonance that makes  
Dull music sweet again.

## EIGHTH VOICE

Death, you will wear a chain of gold,  
And wreaths of roses white and red,  
And nightlong will you dance for him  
With garlands on your head.

Bring a cup and pour him wine,  
And dance for him; for this is he  
Who plays a jocund tune for you  
But will not set you free.

Or go with thongs to scourge the world  
And lay it waste; and then come back  
To sorrow before him in a cage  
And garb yourself in black.

A cage of gold he keeps for you! . . .  
There he will watch you dance,  
And fill his cup, immortally,  
And laugh at circumstance.

## NINTH VOICE

There is a fountain in a wood  
Where wavering lies a moon:  
It plays to the slowly falling leaves  
A sleepy tune.

. . . The peach-trees lean upon a wall  
Of gold and ivory:  
The peacock spreads his tail, the leaves  
Fall silently. . . .



There, amid silken sounds and wine  
And music idly broken,  
The drowsy god observes his world  
With no word spoken.

Arcturus, rise! Orion, fall! . . .  
The white-winged stars obey . . .  
Or else he greets his Fellow-God;  
And there, in the dusk, they play

A game of chess with stars for pawns  
And a silver moon for queen:  
Immeasurable as clouds above  
A chess-board world they lean,

And thrust their hands amid their beards,  
And utter words profound  
That shake the star-swung firmament  
With a fateful sound! . . .

. . . The peach-trees lean upon a wall  
Of gold and ivory;  
The peacock spreads his tail; the leaves  
Fall silently. . . .



## EPILOGUE



## MOUNTEBANK FEELS THE STRINGS AT HIS HEART

In the blue twilight the puller of strings, half-tenderly  
Tumbling his puppets away,— Punch, Judy, and Polly,—  
Into the darkness again; Jack Ketch and Faustus,  
Solomon, crowned with a crown of tinsel and silver,  
Sheba with small hands lifted; Judas Iscariot  
With a noose of frayed thin silk about his neck,  
And the Devil himself in scarlet with white eyes leering,—  
Tumbling them into their box, the cords relaxed,  
The small world darkened, whereupon they danced and  
squeaked,—

Leaving them there in the dusk pell-mell together;  
And turning away, at last, to look from a window  
At a darker and greater world, ring beyond ring  
Of houses and trees and stars, sky upon sky,  
Space beyond silent space of clouds and planets:

Suddenly, there, as he stood at the darkening window  
Watching the glimmer of uncounted worlds in the twilight,  
A world so vast, so piercingly chorded with beauty,  
Blown and glowing in the long-drawn wind of time,—  
He saw himself,— though a god,— the puppet of gods;  
Revolving in antics the dream of a greater dreamer;  
Flung up from a sea of chaos one futile instant,  
To look on a welter of water whirling with crimson;  
And then, in an instant, drawn back once more into chaos.

. . . Was it enough, to remember that in that instant  
He had cried out in a cry of rapture and anguish? . . .

Was he no better than Judy, or Polly,—or Punch, Capering about his cage of twittering dreams? . . .

At the glimmer of immortal worlds below and above,  
Star beyond star, house beyond house,— soul beyond soul? —  
He imagined that Judy, there in the box behind him,  
Stirred her fellows aside and rose in the darkness  
And quavered to him . . . “Listen! you puller of strings!  
Do you think it just to call me into existence,—  
To give me a name,— and give me so little beside? . . .  
To Polly you give her laughter, to Punch his illusions,—  
To me you give nothing but death! ”

"How shall I answer you, Judy? . . .

It is true you have little but sorrow and death at my hands —  
It is true you seem hardly a shadow for Polly and Punch,—  
And this I regret! You step for a moment from darkness  
Turning, bewildered, your face in a twinkle of lamplight,  
Lift sharply your hand,— and vanish once more, and for ever.  
But Judy,—how else could I find you,—how even console  
you?

I too am a puppet. And as you are a symbol for me  
(As Punch is, and Sheba — bright symbols of intricate meanings,

Atoms of soul — who move, and are moved by, me —)  
So I am a symbol, a puppet drawn out upon strings,  
Helpless, well-coloured, with a fixed and unchanging expression

(As though one said 'heartache' or 'laughter'!) of some one  
who leans

Above me, as I above you. . . . And even this Some one,—  
Who knows what compulsion he suffers, what hands out of  
darkness

Play sharp chords upon him! . . . Who knows if those  
hands are not ours! . . .

"Look then at my mind: this tiny old stage, dimly lighted,  
Whereon,— and without my permission,— you symbols parade,  
Saying and meaning such things! You, now, with your death,  
Crying out into my heart, if for only a moment!

Punch with his devils about him, his terror of darkness!  
And Polly there laughing beside him — look now how you  
walk

On the nerve-strings of all I can know, to delight me, to  
torture,

To pass in a nightmare of gesture before me, how heedless  
Of me,— whom our gods have ordained to exist as your world!  
Think, now! I can never escape you. Did you call me a  
tyrant?

I desire to change you — and cannot! . . . I desire to see you  
Under a pear-tree — (we'll say that the tree is in blossom —)  
A warm day of sunlight, and laughing,— at nothing whatever! . . .

A green hill's behind you; a cloud like a dome tops the hill;



A poplar tree, like a vain girl, leans over a mirror  
Trying on silver, then green, perplexed, but in pleasure;  
And you there, alone in the sunlight, watch bees in the pear-  
tree,

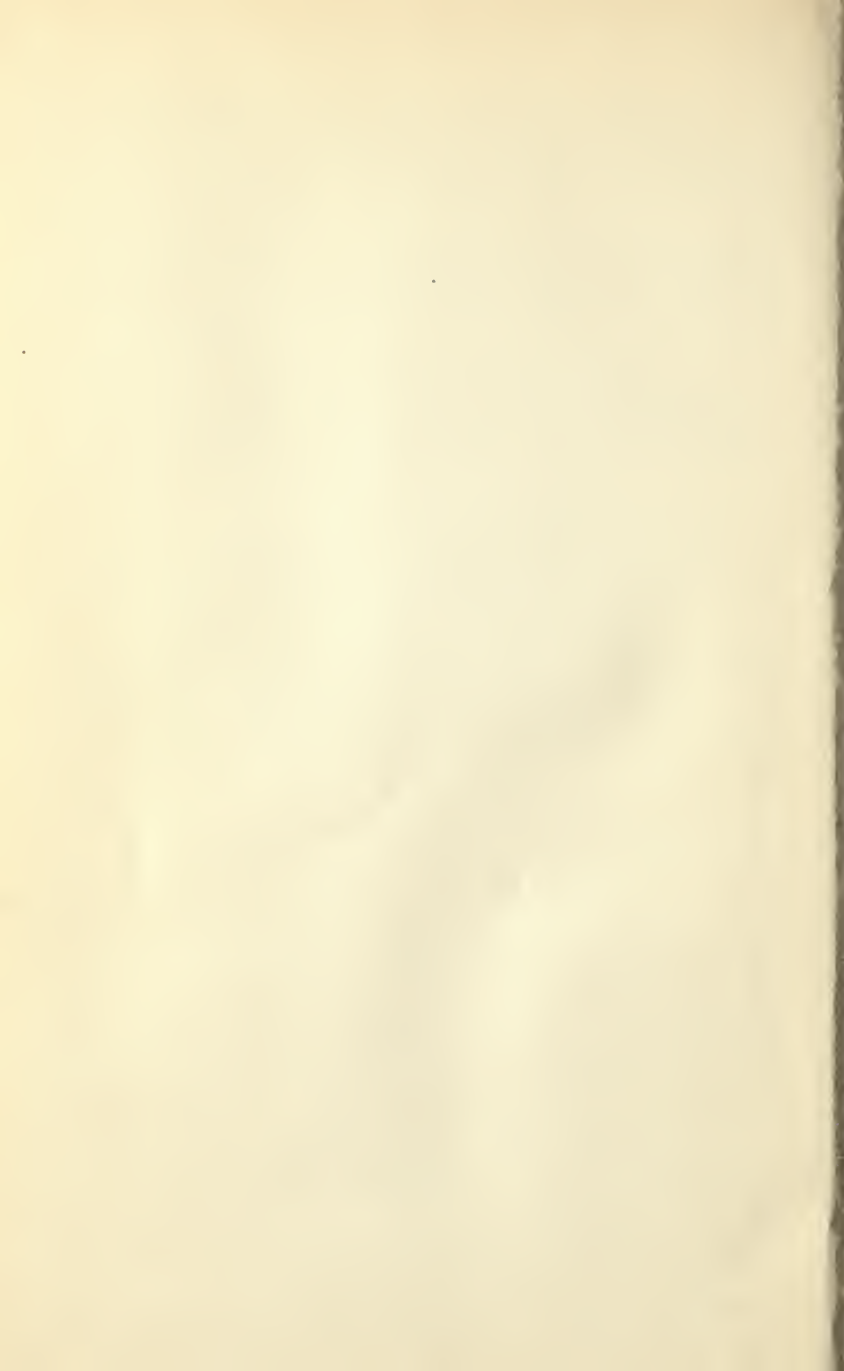
Dipping the leaves; and you laugh — for no reason whatever!  
Delightful! One moment, at least, no Punch can disturb you,  
No Polly whirl dead leaves about you! You stand there  
untroubled . . .

Thus, then, I desire to see you, to have you exist  
If only an instant; yet down come the shadows between us,  
And all they have left me is — Judy, to whom I have given  
A name, and so little beside! ”

. . . There was silence a moment  
And when he turned back expecting, perhaps, to see Judy  
Leaning her small white elbows there on the box-edge,—  
No, not a sign. The puppets lay huddled together,  
Arms over heads, contorted, just where he had dropped them;  
Inscrutable, silent, terrific, like those made eternal  
Who stare, without thought, at a motionless world without  
meaning. 213

THE END







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